

**SALUTE
TO
THE
PROFESSIONALS**

Dr. Lois DeBakey

Although assailed and badgered by denunciations and regulations, the North American doctor still enjoys many a privilege—moral, emotional, economic, and intellectual. (Please note, no “etc.” dangling vaguely, lazily, and titillatingly at the end of the list.) The average English-speaking person, for example, turns to *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* if he (please also note, no “or she” here) feels obliged to furbish his presentation with a literary gem. The physician, however, has his own private source if he wishes to decorate his piece with the flowers of vicarious culture: Maurice B. Strauss’ *Familiar Medical Quotations*. Likewise, he who respects the proper use of the English language turns to Fowler, Gowers, Barzun, Bernstein, Strunk and White, or Hayakawa. But the disciples of Aesculapius have their own guides to better speaking and writing, and among them none compares to the DeBakey sisters, Lois and her faithful partner Selma. If he were not so busy as a famous surgeon and medical statesman, brother Michael also might be a member of the DeBakey team, dedicated to improving the doctor’s skill in communication.

Instead of writing books on the subject,¹ Lois has implemented her passion for improving the medical report by means of numerous journal articles and lectures, as well as courses and workshops characterized by close personal exchanges with her students. Whatever the medium, the DeBakey teaching is specific and vigorous. In her journal articles she has laid about her with an unsparing cudgel to smite medical writing that is contradictory, illogical, ambiguous, diffuse, vague, rambling, murky, disorganized, ungrammatical, vogueish, repetitious, monotonous, misleading, barbaric, jargon-ridden, high-flown, trite, pedantic, euphemistic, circulatory, evasive, and pretentious—"deadwood" in its presentation, and "gobbledygook" in its message. Whereas Lois and Selma excel in the use of adjectives that describe writing they do not like, their comments are far from entirely negative. Their advice, written or oral, is also positive. They plead for writing that is proper, grammatical, functional, lucid, dynamic, active in voice, precise, accurate, honest, sincere, natural, unpretentious, flexible, clear, objective, and forceful.

The descriptive words and phrases, good and bad, are all DeBakey's. It is of course possible she might also object to the excessive use of parenthetical comments, such as frequently interrupt the sentences of this tribute. I do have to point out, however, that I tried to observe DeBakey precepts.

But let no one imagine that Lois' preachings are merely evangelical denunciations; they sparkle with examples of specific and unconsciously humorous syntactical errors and gaucheries committed by medical writers. A pet peeve of hers is "etc.," not only because it is Latin where English would do, but because it usually says nothing. She and Selma in a letter to the editor have expressed their cacoëthes (the word is Selma's, not mine) for the unabashed use of the generic "he," used conveniently for centuries to refer to a human being of either sex. This letter should be required reading for embattled feminists who might think that equality and status are furthered by desexing such words as "manhole" and "man-of-war." And how about "manuscript?"

Among the courses and workshops given by the DeBakeys, the most famous is that which they have organized annually since 1970 at the annual meeting of the American College of Surgeons. Because of her own skilled presentations, and her organization and

¹ Last year, the C. V. Mosby Co. of St. Louis published *The Scientific Journal: Editorial Policies and Practices*, edited and in large part prepared by Lois DeBakey, but the book's purpose is to guide and assist primarily the editors rather than the authors of scientific publications.

direction of other instructors participating in her course, the A.C.S. exercises in writing are invariably oversubscribed, and elicit enthusiastic letters of appreciation from the many fine physicians who, often because of distorted emphasis in their education, are much handier with the knife and needle than with the word and paragraph.

Lois is much more than a coach of syntactic gymnastics. She is committed to the use of language as a medium that has made possible concepts and the creation and understanding of the humanities (huwomaniities ?) and science. As a committed ethicist, she is particularly offended by what she calls the "ghostwriter"—the officious editor or the anonymous hireling engaged to write a medical report because the real author is either incompetent or lazy. Her dedication to ethics, whether in experimentation, the practice of medicine, or in writing, is deep and unshakable. She is convinced, furthermore, that sloppy ideas and sloppy writing go hand in hand, and that, conversely, well organized reports, written or audiovisual, promote not only communication but development of good ideas.

Lois looks and acts like a Southern belle, but she comes from a closely knit Lebanese family brought up by parents who taught their children to honor high standards, integrity, culture, imagination, and—I use the word without apology—intellectual elitism. But parents can do only so much. The offspring must also have distinctive qualities and qualifications. Lois DeBakey, Ph.D., is now a full professor at Baylor College of Medicine (Houston), with the title of Professor of Scientific Communication; she holds a similar appointment at Tulane University School of Medicine (New Orleans). In addition, she serves on several journal editorial boards and on a number of national committees, accrediting agencies, and governmental consulting bodies. She is currently a member of a special commission on writing established by the Council for Basic Education to investigate the "literacy crisis." But the personality by far outweighs the degree, title, and appointments, as anyone knows who has had the privilege of being in the presence of this petite and graceful woman with her shining brown eyes, at once soft and commanding, her incisive language, and her unswerving determination to make us doctors, as well as other scientists, speak and write better.

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